

## **PEPFAR's Support Empowers Women to Achieve Independence**

The President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) program meets patients where they are to better serve their individual needs and reduce unnecessary barriers to care. One innovative approach used in PEPFAR programming in Ethiopia is the Differentiated Service Delivery Model (DSDM), which addresses the unique needs of people in care.

Mekdes, a single parent living in the town of Assela, was identified as someone who may have been a contact of someone who was HIV-positive, so it was important that she get tested. Initially, she declined to be tested; people living with HIV face stigma and discrimination, and she was afraid how testing positive for HIV might impact her economically. However, after repeated conversations with a caseworker, who knew from her assessment that she was at risk of being HIV-positive, she decided to go to a health facility to be tested. She tested positive for HIV and was immediately linked to treatment to reduce her risk of developing AIDS.

Following a community-based approach, which connects close contacts of HIV-positive individuals with testing services, the healthcare worker was able to evaluate Mekdes' child, who also tested positive for HIV. Both mother and child were linked to care and treatment and began a medication program to reduce the amount of virus in their bodies and keep them symptom-free and healthy. To ensure that Mekdes and her child were sticking to the program, the PEPFAR project assigned a caseworker to the household to assist in identifying the type of support they would need.

The caseworker and the town's Community Coalition Committee (CCC) provided food assistance and clothing for her child. After addressing their immediate needs, the program support team continued to visit Mekdes and her child to make sure they were doing well.

Because of its positive impact on her life, Mekdes became interested in participating in the PEPFAR project. Now, she is thrilled to have become a member of the community advisory group for other women living with HIV. She expressed her gratitude, saying, "Since I connected with and befriended women who share my status, the group has been an immense help to me." The community support

group provides a safe space for Mekdes and her peers to discuss their health issues without fear of prejudice. They also share valuable tips and advice based on their experiences with healthcare professionals.

Before joining the group, Mekdes struggled with depression and felt unable to confide in anyone about her status. She feared discrimination and unfair treatment. However, the support and encouragement she received from the group gave her the confidence to openly discuss her status and educate others about the importance of HIV testing.

Mekdes also joined the Village Saving and Loan Association (VSLA) group to begin saving money and enrolled in an asset transfer program that allowed her to sell sugar cane in the market through collaboration with the CCC. Mekdes was also able to secure a government subsidy with the support of the CCC. She is grateful because she no longer must spend half of her income, which she previously earned from washing clothes, on rent. Instead, she can use that money to better provide for her child.

Mekdes' story is a testament to the power of community and collaboration. Through the support of the PEPFAR program, women like Mekdes are able to overcome obstacles and achieve their goals. Her journey serves as an inspiration to others facing similar challenges, and she hopes to continue sharing her experiences to help others in need.